

# Under The Radar

*While the media landscape is preoccupied by COVID-19, politics and business grinds on. 'Under the Radar' provides a concise overview and thoughtful analysis of critical stories currently being overlooked.*



# From Russia with ricin

## *What happened?*

Czech investigative outlet Respekt reports that Prague Mayor Zedněk Hřib is under police protection after a person carrying Russian diplomatic papers arrived in Prague three weeks ago with the intention of assassinating him using ricin. Citing anonymous sources within Czech intelligence, the magazine reports that another Prague politician, Ondřej Kolář, is also on the Russians' hit list. And while Hřib has confirmed he is under protection - citing a risk to his life - neither politician has commented on the particulars of the plot.

Both men have previously angered the Russian government. Hřib supported renaming the square in front of the Russian Embassy in Prague after Boris Nemtsov, the Russian opposition leader slain a stone's throw away from the Kremlin in 2015. For his part, Kolář participated in a years-long effort to remove a statue of Soviet-era Marshal Ivan Konev, over opposition from the national government. Dmitry Peskov, Vladimir Putin's spokesman, called the entire tale a "canard". But if it walks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck...

## *What does it mean?*

While one would dearly love to take the Putin regime at its word, it does have a spotty record when it comes to executing people on foreign soil.

Although, to be fair, it has traditionally stuck to killing its own citizens on foreign soil (see: Litvinenko, Alexander), not foreign politicians.

Then again, it doesn't seem likely the Czech police would take the extraordinary step of placing leading politicians under protection without cause. And the Czech Republic does have a special place in Russian hell for its historic role in the toppling of international communism (see: Spring, Prague; and Havel, Vaclav). That the Russians would try engage in some subterfuge with the world distracted by COVID-19 is certainly within the realm of possibility.

Let's also remember that most Russian provocation abroad is meant to cement support at home. And with Putin struggling to get a grip on the coronavirus and oil prices hitting historic lows the Russian leader needs some opioids for his masses.

That said, most of the assassinations (or mysterious 'suicides') of Putin's critics have been meted out to remind those closest to the regime that they are never beyond reach should they narc. As former FT journalist Catherine Belton lays out in excruciating detail in her new book "Putin's People", the entire edifice of post-communist Russia is built on money, threats, and intimidation. Any provocation must be met with a response, whether that provocation happens at home or abroad.

# Not in my backyard!

## *What happened?*

A coalition consisting of British actors Bill Nighy and David Morrissey, the billionaire owner of Foxtons estate agents, and the painter Maggi Hambling, are spearheading a campaign to stop a new nuclear power station being built on the Suffolk coast.

The group, who all live in the region or have close connections to it, claim that the Sizewell site is “totally unsuitable” because it’s in an ‘Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty’. They also raised safety concerns and accused the developers of avoiding scrutiny.

## *What does it mean?*

Looking beyond the personal motives of the campaigners (and the merits of the Natural Beauty argument), this is another example of nuclear power’s failure to make headway in the climate conversation.

Over the past decade, climate change has shot up the political agenda and become a primary concern amongst voters. But attitudes towards nuclear energy have plateaued – little more than 35% of the general public trust nuclear power as a safe eco-friendly solution. This indicates that the industry isn’t competing on a level playing field - for instance, there isn’t an IMDB page dedicated to “most popular solar energy accident movies”.

Yet experts have evidenced that without nuclear energy, renewables would only power 60% of Britain’s electricity grid, while The Committee on Climate Change recently concluded that 95% is needed to meet zero-carbon targets.

But for the same reason celebrities don’t want an eyesore disrupting their country walks, MPs do not want to antagonise their constituents by campaigning for nuclear power plants. And even when nuclear power receives political backing, it often plays second fiddle: heat pumps, tidal energy trials, and badger culling all receive more column inches in the Labour Party’s “Green Industrial Revolution”.

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Rather than dithering and delaying, Britain should look at the example of Sweden and France. Both have reversed policies that were set to completely phase out nuclear power. They have recognised the merits of utilising an industry with an immediately accessible work force, proven efficiency, and most importantly, low carbon emissions.

Nuclear power is by no means a perfect solution, but for now it’s a necessary component of any green industrial policy. Without it, more areas of ‘outstanding natural beauty’ will be under threat from the consequences of missing zero-carbon targets.

# How an FT Journalist snooped for a scoop

## *What happened?*

A reporter for the *Financial Times* allegedly listened in on private conference calls between staff at rival newspapers. *The Independent* claims that Mark Di Stefano, the FT's Media & Technology correspondent, used an anonymous account linked to his mobile to eavesdrop on Zoom meetings in which senior management informed staff about furloughing, salary cuts and layoffs.

He allegedly sat in on calls involving both *The Independent* and the *Evening Standard* staff, including a meeting hosted by the Standard's editor George Osbourne. Di Stefano later posted the details of the calls on Twitter, before writing a story, published by the *Financial Times*, which laid out the details of the outlets' furlough plans, as well as quotes from editors. Di Stefano, who has since been suspended, claims that "people on the call" were his sources for the story.

## *What does it mean?*

Di Stefano clearly violated the FT's code of conduct which stipulates "The press must not seek to obtain or publish material acquired by intercepting private or mobile telephone calls, messages or emails". And at what cost? Redundancies at news organizations are not exactly Watergate.

Editors have enough concerns at present - what with the future of many news publications lying in the balance - without needing to worry about individuals from the same profession furtively listening in on their private conversations. Not to speak of the fact that job security is a deeply private and personal issue for employees, whether they work for a paper or on a shop floor, which adds a whole extra layer of distastefulness.

And while this may not be the start of a whole new phone hacking scandal, the story should certainly act as a wakeup call to businesses of all kinds which, since the transition to remote working, are now more exposed to privacy breaches. Zoom, which currently leads the video conferencing market with 300m daily users, is being used by everyone from journalists to ministers despite the well-reported security concerns. And while competitors such as Facebook begin to launch rival services, it is unlikely that Zoom will be toppled as the go-to app anytime soon.

With that degree of market dominance, one can assume that this story is just the tip of the iceberg, with intrusions in company calls occurring across the world. And so Zoom may well have opened up a new frontier in corporate espionage. With the ability for an entire workforce to be in a single virtual meeting, never before have businesses been so vulnerable. And if journalists are able to listen in to your calls, just imagine how easy it is for those who really know what they're doing.

# What Trafalgar Is Reading

## The Very Real Threat of Trump's Deepfake

[The Atlantic](#)

“And then, at 8:25:50 pm ET, the president retweeted an account he had never retweeted before. The account had posted a video of former Vice President Joe Biden, crudely and obviously manipulated to show him twitching his eyebrows and lolling his tongue.”

- David Frum details the events on Sunday, when President Trump retweeted a deepfake video and explains why such actions are dangerous.

## Rupert Murdoch's Sunday Times Backed Brexit And Boris. Now Number 10 Sees It As The Most Hostile Paper In The

Country

[Buzzfeed](#)

“The once symbiotic relationship between Johnson and the Sunday Times has ‘irretrievably broken down’” - Joey D’Urso and Alex Wickham report how The Sunday Times has gone from friend to foe after publishing four very damaging stories since Boris Johnson took office.

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## But if you must read about Coronavirus

## We Still Don't Know How the Coronavirus Is Killing Us

[New York Magazine](#)

“The death rate is no longer accelerating, but holding steady, which is apparently the point at which an onrushing terror can begin fading into background noise.

Meanwhile, the disease itself appears to be shape-shifting before our eyes.”

- David Wallace-Wells on how much we still do not know about COVID-19, despite being six months into the pandemic.



## What we do

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